



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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**PROVIDENCE FRUIT AND PRODUCE WAREHOUSE COMPANY BUILDING
LISTED ON NATIONAL REGISTER**

The centerpiece of Providence's once-vibrant provisions warehouse district has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of architecture and commerce. Frederick C. Williamson, Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added the Providence Fruit and Produce Warehouse Company Building to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. From 1929 to its closing in 1998, the Providence Fruit and Produce Warehouse Company Building served as the state's most important distribution center for Rhode Island-grown and imported fresh fruits and vegetables. The building is also significant as an excellent example of utilitarian industrial architecture.

The Providence Fruit and Produce Warehouse Company (PFPWC) Building is located at 4-64 Harris Avenue in the former provisions warehouse district. The four-acre parcel faces the Woonasquatucket River on the north side and the train tracks of the former New York New Haven and Hartford (NYNH&H) Railroad on the south side. It is a long, two-story, flat-roofed Art Moderne-style industrial building, built of reinforced concrete and brick.

The warehouse lost several bays and a railway tower at the east end during the construction of an Interstate 95 ramp in the 1980s. As a result, the east elevation of the building was sealed with concrete blocks. Most of the loading bays have their original metal doors. Twenty square, red brick elevator shafts rise above the south elevation of the building. The interior consists predominantly of large rooms divided by concrete block partition walls. Large reinforced concrete mushroom columns support the first and second floors and the roof.

The PFPWC Building was constructed in 1929 as a central and convenient location for local fruit and produce merchants. Beginning in 1773, local produce dealers operated from wagons and carts along Dyer and South Water Streets in the vicinity of the former Weybosset Street Bridge. This open-air market flanked Providence's commercial waterfront. Construction of the Merchant's Cold Storage Warehouse along the train tracks north of downtown in 1894 represented the beginning of a shift from maritime delivery of perishable goods to delivery by rail.

In the 1910s, a group of local produce men formed the Providence Market Gardeners' Association and purchased a four-acre tract from the Dyer family in the Woonasquatucket valley, between Promenade Street and Davis Park. The dealers operated in open-air stalls at what became known as the Governor Dyer Cooperative Market. In 1927, Frank A. Crossley and some of the remaining Market Square dealers established Providence Terminal Market, Inc. (PTM, Inc.) to secure land and construct a market building. PTM arranged with the Providence Produce Warehouse Company, a subsidiary of the NYNH&H Railroad, to erect a building on the railroad yard south of the Merchants Cold Storage Warehouse.

Construction began in 1928 and was completed in 1929. At the opening ceremony, national, state, local, and railroad officials hailed the building as the "finest and most efficient distributing unit for perishable foods in the United States." The \$1 million facility was designed by Emory W. Ballou of the prominent local engineering firm of Jenks and Ballou. Rental fees varied by the number of units occupied, access to an elevator, and availability of a cooling apparatus. Additional cold storage

was available at the Merchants Cold Storage Warehouse, which was accessible via an underground tunnel. Imported produce could arrive at the building by rail. After the goods were processed and packed, they could be loaded on to trucks for local distribution.

The Providence Fruit and Produce Warehouse Company Building was in continuous use from 1929 to 1998. Long-term tenants included the Tourtellot Company and William J. Canaan, Inc., both of which operated there for some 60 years. In the 1990s, trucking replaced rail transport, and the wholesale produce business wilted. Large supermarket chains began buying fruits and vegetables directly from growers, eliminating a significant portion of the dealers' income. In 1998, the State of Rhode Island Department of Transportation acquired the PFPWC Building, and the last produce vendors moved out. The new owners, Carpionato Properties of Johnston, plan to rehabilitate the building for mixed residential and commercial use.

The National Register nomination for the Providence Fruit and Produce Warehouse Company Building was prepared by preservation consultant Edward Connors. According to Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the RI Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, "The Produce Warehouse was the food-basket for metropolitan Providence. Providence's growth and development as an urban center is mirrored in the history of this building, and the planned historic rehabilitation project will promote the resurgence of the Woonsocket River corridor."

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides other benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning of Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal and state tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed in the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is the state agency responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

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